

THE CURSE OF SABINA

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"Good evening, lad"

It was a strange voice. Loren stopped his work and turned. An old woman peered at him over the fence. She frightened him; he dropped his hoe. He wanted to run.

She spoke again. It was in slow, drawn syllables, "Have you seen Marna?"

Loren had never heard of Marna. And he had no idea who the stranger might be. She was old, her back was bent, her dirty gray hair hung long and loosely over her cheeks. In the setting sun it was difficult to see her face, but the features appeared sharp and hideous. She carried a bundle on her back. Finally, Loren found his tongue, "Who . . . Who is Marna?"

"Marna? Marna is my little girl. Have you seen her?"

"No . . . no, I haven't." Loren began to feel sorry for the old woman. "Where did you lose her?"

"Lose? . . . lose Marna? Oh, I didn't lose her. Someone took her away." The stranger stretched her arm over the fence. "Come here, Lad."

Loren hesitated a moment. He didn't want to get near her, but in spite of himself he stepped closer.

She laid her heavily veined hand on his wrist. "Would you give an old lady a cool drink of water?"

No Christian had ever refused the thirsty a drink of water, Loren had heard his father say many times. The stranger was thirsty; it was his duty. She surely could do no harm. "The well is out back of the house," he said, stepping away from her. "Come down to the gate. I'll let you in."

As they walked along the fence Loren noticed that it was not a bundle she carried, but a large grey cat perched on her shoulder. As he held the gate for her Loren decided she was not as ugly as he had thought. Her eyes were sad and almost kind. He hurried up the little path and around to the back of the big red farm house. He found his mother in the kitchen preparing supper and he told her about the visitor. She reprimanded him for being friendly with a stranger when his father

was not at home, but handed him a fresh dipper for his Christian duty. When he came out of the house he found the old woman waiting patiently at the pump.

Loren handed her a full dipper then sat down on an overturned bucket to get a better look at his visitor. She drank greedily and noisily as the clear water drooled down her chin and onto the dusty calico dress. When she had her fill she held the dipper down for the cat which was now standing at her feet. "Clotilde is also thirsty," she said to the boy. He thought it was an extremely queer looking creature. The ash-colored fur was shaggy and seemed to hang loosely over an empty carcass. He had never seen a cat with such eyes before; they were glassy and blue. When the cat finished it looked up at its mistress and opened its mouth in a gesture of sound but made no noise. Loren noticed that some of its teeth were missing. The old woman picked up the dipper, drank the remaining contents and handed it to the boy.

Mrs. Alexander was drying her hands on her apron as she came out the back door. "Good evening, has Loren taken care of you?" she addressed the stranger, eyeing her with some curiosity and suspicion.

"Oh, he has been very kind. I don't think I could have walked much farther without that drink. He's a very fine boy . . . he is your son?" Loren's mother nodded proudly, and the stranger continued. "I never had a son . . . I had a daughter, though. That's who I'm looking for. Have you seen her? . . . Have you seen my Marna?"

"I'm sorry but I'm afraid I haven't. When did you see her last?"

"I don't remember," she said gazing blankly into Mrs. Alexander's eyes. "It was a long time ago. She was four years old. She had long golden hair. It was real gold. Marna was so beautiful. I was beautiful then, too, and my hair was lovely. It was the color of buttercups."

Loren's mother was silent. She was staring in amazement at the old woman.

Finally she motioned for her to sit down on a work bench. Sitting beside the pathetic figure Mrs. Alexander's heart softened. "What happened to your daughter?"

The old woman was quick to reply. "They took her away from me. They came into my house and took Marna away. And they beat me and kicked me."

"Who could have done that? Where did this happen?"

"I don't remember who . . . I can't remember where . . . but it is the truth. I swear it."

Mrs. Alexander found herself weeping for the old woman and before she realized why, she had asked the stranger in for supper. She was convinced that the old woman was harmless. Albert would be late for his meal this evening for he had taken a wagon load of chickens and eggs into town late in the afternoon. Her husband disliked leaving them alone; their farmhouse was so isolated. She was sure, however, that after he had heard the woman's story he would not object to her staying for supper.

"Loren, go out and call Patricia so we can eat. She should be in the barn. She was out playing with the lamb."

"So you have a daughter, too. How old is she?"

"Patricia is five, and a very helpful little girl for her age. I also have another son—Donald, nine and a half months old. He's had his supper and is sound asleep by now."

They were interrupted by the children laughing as they rushed through the doorway. Patricia's brown eyes gave the woman and her cat a thorough inspection as she poured fresh water into the wash bowl. The old woman returned the careful glances and spoke softly to herself as she walked over to the wash stand.

"What a beautiful child. Just like gold," she said running her bony fingers through the child's blond hair. "Just like gold. You must be Marna. You are Marna, aren't you, little girl?"

The child rushed across the room and threw her wet hands around her mother's waist; her terrified eyes glanced back over her shoulder to the woman's stare. The feeling of apprehension returned as Mrs. Alexander clasped Patricia in her arms.

"Don't talk so foolishly. This isn't your

child. This is my daughter, Patricia. She couldn't possibly be your Marna. Do you understand?"

The old woman muttered inaudibly to herself and wandered back to the table. The matter was considered dismissed and they sat down to supper. The Alexander family did not eat very heartily but sat silently watching their dinner guest. The old woman ignored them completely except when she occasionally asked for more food. She kept the cat on her lap and from time to time would feed it morsels from her own plate, speaking with child-like understanding to the animal. She told Clotilde how fortunate they were to find such kind people and that they must do something to show their appreciation. The cat would open its mouth and try vainly to make a noise in answer to its mistress.

Mrs. Alexander's attempt at conversation was incoherent and useless. The woman seemed unable to remember anything else about herself — where she was from or where she had been. The children, watching with amusement the old woman's barbarous table manners, soon forgot their fear, but Mrs. Alexander remained very uneasy until she heard the wagon wheels come up the road.

The children rushed to the back door to welcome their father. He gave them each a quick kiss on the forehead then addressed his wife.

"Sorry I'm late, Martha, but I started talking to some of the men on the square and you know how that is—" Mr. Alexander's voice dropped as he saw the stranger at his family table.

"Albert, our visitor here stopped for a drink of water; she was tired and hungry so I thought I should—"

He interrupted, "God forbid! Old Sabina! It is Sabina under my very roof. Martha, didn't you realize? Of course, you didn't know, but . . ." The surprised old woman was staring madly as he shouted at her, "You are Old Sabina, aren't you?"

Breathing heavily, the old woman pulled herself up from the chair. "Why did you have to come here? I was so happy . . . they were so kind to me."

"Martha couldn't you see—. Old Sabina . . . that's all the town is talking about. They said she was seen in this dis-

trict, but little did I think that I'd find her in my own house."

"But Albert, what has she done? Who is she? Tell me."

"This woman — this wierd creature— sitting at my table wanders around the countryside begging kindness and then leaving destruction. You feed her and then she burns your barns and poisons your cattle and carries off your children . . ."

"You lie, you lie," she shouted rushing at the man, beating her fists in the air. "I do not burn nor poison . . . I am not wicked. I'm just a good old lady do you understand? . . . a good old lady."

"A good old lady! Hah! You're a witch; that's what you are—an old witch that has traveled over the country for thirty years claiming to be looking for a daughter and you leave death and misfortune wherever you go. I've heard about you."

"You lie. You lie!" She screamed with a hateful tongue. "I'm not wicked. I'm not a witch. I wouldn't hurt anyone. I wouldn't hurt anyone . . . unless, they tried to keep Marna from me." The cat crawled up on her shoulder.

"Get out of this house." He clenched a meat fork from the table in his fist. "You daughter of Satan, you'll not harm my family. Get out! Do you hear me?"

The old woman pursed her lips and then spat in his face. Brushing past the mother with her terrified children she paused at the door.

"Curse you, man; curse you. By the forty-seven devils of Sodom I swear vengeance upon you and your family. The sun shall not rise without your regretting this."

Mr. Alexander followed her out the door and watched as she went down the yard, through the gate, and into the night, laughing and screaming and cursing at the top of her voice. As he closed the door, he thought to himself, "She's sure to come back . . . what shall I do?"

His wife was thinking the same, for she asked, "Albert, what are we going to do!"

He realized there was only one thing they could do — keep on their guard all

night. The children, the house, the barn, all must be watched. He gave his wife a pistol to keep a vigil over the youngest members of the family and sent Loren to guard the barn. The father intended to keep a careful watch over all.

The hours of the night were long and tense. And every minute of every hour the thought of the woman's last words beat in their minds. ". . . The sun shall not rise without your regretting this . . ."

It was difficult for Loren, sitting in the eerie silence of the barn, to convince himself that a thirteen year old boy with a gun in his hand should not be afraid of anything. But he was afraid. He was afraid of what might happen to Patricia or to Donald or to his mother. He thought of himself falling asleep and the old woman coming. He thought of the horrible things that she might do. He almost hoped that if any evil would occur that he would be the victim. If he had remembered what his father had always told them about strangers all this would not have happened. The old woman would have gone on her way, and there would be no curse on the Alexander family. With fear and with hope he watched the eastern sky as the morning hour approached.

Loren's mother prayed silently as she sat at the open bedroom window, the children asleep at her side. She was praying for the dawn.

As the stars disappeared from the morning sky Mr. Alexander began to wonder about the old woman's curse. Perhaps she was not a witch after all. Maybe she would not be back; maybe her threat was just a foolish ejaculation. Could it be that he had showed such an injustice to an innocent woman? He, too, prayed for the dawn.

And the dawn finally came. Never before had the first dim rays of a dawn meant so much to anyone. It was with a prayer in their hearts that the Alexanders stood hand in hand watching the morning sun rise slowly above the eastern horizon.